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A Labor Attitude Toward Production—An English Point of View

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WHAT do we mean by labor? What is the aim of production? Is maximum production injurious to the workers?

One has only to read the newspapers, to listen to the political orators or to study the origin and aims of strikes to realize how confusedly and how carelessly most men think about these questions. Are the common conceptions concerning them justified? When we speak of labor do we consciously mean only that manual labor employed upon a piece of metal or a piece of wood? When we think of production do we consider only its effect upon those profits which can be stated in cash percentages? Do we really regard maximum production as necessarily creating an unemployed and devitalized proletariat.

WHAT IS LABOR?

What is labor? The answer given by the Marxian socialist is euphonic but not convincing. Grandiloquently he replies that labor is the source of all wealth. Is it? There are people who think that the Almighty had little to do with the creation of wealth. Unless the geologists and the physiographers are altogether wrong, he preceded the capitalist, the miner, the brick-maker, the carpenter, and even the agriculturalist. The Marxian is wrong, of course. Labor is the operating force rather than the source or creative agency. This is proved by the existence, in different parts of the world, of immense reserves of wealth which

neither capital nor labor have yet touched.

The exact definition of a term which includes infinite possibilities is difficult. He who essays definition may involve himself in a morass. In making the attempt, I fully realize the danger. Definition, however, is necessary if clarity is to be obtained.

It appears to me that labor is that inventive, initiative, constructive and manipulative capacity which, applied to materials, conditions and requirements, extracts, makes and distributes those things which are essential to human existence, enlightenment and happiness.

Such a definition may be imperfect, but it takes cognizance of the inventive labor of a Watts or an Edison, and the efforts of those who conceive businesses, provide capital, erect buildings, organize manipulative and technical personnel, and discover and exploit markets. It provides also a niche for technical staffs, for salesmen and agents. It recognizes manual labor, both skilled and unskilled, whether it is employed in fashioning materials or distributing them. It does not ignore the possibility of extending credit to that political effort which keeps open, or should keep open, national and international highways and opportunities.

This conception of labor immediately challenges many popularly accepted theories. It also invites comparison as to value and remuneration.

THE MANUAL WORKER

Should each factor in the scheme of production be treated equally? If there is differentiation, in whose favor should it operate? Should the inventor, the capitalist, the organizer or the manual worker have preference? Each will answer these questions according to his understanding and his circumstances. To me it seems just that the manual worker should be favorably placed; that his share of the profits of production should be generous and assured, and that his social obligations, to his family and to his fellows, should be recognized when his share is determined.

There is one eternal and immutable stipulation. The manual worker must produce value in return for the value he receives. Whether his share is paid in wages or in goods is immaterial to the question. He must replace this share by producing what will balance his personal account, replace waste, provide reserves, and maintain the state. If the manual laborer, coöperating with his fellow laborers, does these four things, the face value of the wages he receives and the hours he works are of little moment. He can have a hundred pounds per day for a two-hour day, provided the value of the hundred pounds to the community is produced.

Everything depends upon production. Standards of living cannot be raised, nor can existence be maintained unless mankind accepts this contention. Eloquence, rhetoric or legislative action, whether acting separately or collectively, cannot make the corn grow or build houses, or feed children or clothe humanity. Only working and thinking can provide the things essential to life and comfort. The degrees may differ, but the fact remains constant.

Manual workers will individually admit this, but there is no mistaking their fear of the effects of what has been described as over-production. To this they have been taught to attribute under-employment and poverty. Produce too much and capital has no further use for us, is the phrase with which they defend "ca' canny."

DOES OVER-PRODUCTION CAUSE UNEMPLOYMENT?

Is it true that over-production creates unemployment? Has there ever been over-production of those things mankind really needs? Have we really produced too many houses, too many boots, too much food? Are we not rather confusing production with capacity to purchase? Shoe-makers have been walking about unemployed while their children went to school barefooted. Garment workers frequented the Labor Exchange while their children were ill-clothed, and other occupations were similarly suffering. If the consumers, who are the whole people, had been able to buy, there would have been no unemployment.

Here lies the great danger of today. Taxation, imperfect methods, human misunderstandings have increased the cost of production and correspondingly decreased the capacity to purchase. The extent of this decrease is not yet apparent. Reserves have been encroached upon, currency has been inflated and credit has been exploited in the vain hope of escaping the fact. These devices have clothed the problem as with a mist but they have left it unsolved. It can only be solved by all the men who work facing economic facts and combining to produce what all men need.

Can they do this safely? Will those who conceive, organize and capitalize do their parts? Will they adopt meth-

ods of production which give maximum results in goods or services with minimum strains upon men and women? Will they arrange that the industries for which they are responsible shall bear the cost of accident, of sickness and of unemployment, which under any scheme must sometimes be unavoidable, as for example when changes of method are introduced, or changing demands necessitate changed commodities?

There is plenty of idle talk about the remuneration of capital. This arises partly from the habit of advertising profits and interring losses. One hears often of the fortunes made but seldom of the fortunes lost. There is the added error of stating profits in aggregates instead of in percentages of capital employed.

Capital does, however, sometimes receive remuneration out of all proportion to the service it renders. Sometimes it is foresight which makes these larger profits; sometimes it is

sheer luck. In either case, the effect upon the imagination of the mass is a bad one.

To remove misunderstanding and to secure immediate productive results should be the aims of every man interested in human well-being. Rivalry and antagonism between manual workers and other workers and capital must be replaced by that intelligent understanding which comes from joint and honest handling of difficult problems.

The alternative is famine and suffering such as the world has not yet seen. Not only will the area and numbers involved be greater, but the people are more nervously developed and consequently less able to bear calamity. It has been an appreciation of this danger which has led me to ignore the personal danger, and during the past five years to point out the futility of nominal wages, and while pleading for a fair day's pay, to insist upon a fair day's work.